DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 096 609 CS 001 248

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TITLE The Reaing Instructor's Role in Assisting Content Area Instructors in Reading and Study Skills.
PUB DATE May 74
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (19th, New Orleans, May 1-4, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS College Instruction; *Content Reading; *Developmental Reading; *Inservice Teacher Education; Preservice Education; *Reading Instruction; Reading Research; Reading Skills; Remedial Reading; Secondary Education; Study Skills

ABSTRACT

The problems with the premise that content area instructors should be teaching reading and study skills are many. Content teachers, particularly at the college level, disagree with the premise: "If a student can't read, he doesn't belong in college"--type of philosophy. On the whole, content teachers have never been exposed to a course on reading theory or skills. Many reading teachers and coordinators are not prepared properly to gain the interest or involvement of other teachers. But the biggest problem in obtaining the cooperation of other teachers in a developmental reading program is that reading personnel have turned reading into a course, or several courses, and in many cases reading labs and reading centers. Suggestions for making reading courses and reading teachers more helpful for students and for content instructors include finding and using available research relating to reading in the content areas; providing services for subject matter teachers such as testing, conducting workshops for students and for staff members, making modules in vocabulary or comprehension, and explaining the program and offering materials for use in their classrooms; and developing credit courses and workshops in reading for teachers and students and using reading courses as preservice teacher training. (TO)

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THE READING INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE IN ASSISTING CONTENT AREA INSTRUCTORS IN READING AND STUDY SKILLS

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The title of this presentation is based on the premise that content area instructors should be teaching reading and study skills. The problem with this premise is manifold. For one, the content area instructors, particularly at the college level, disagree with the premise: "If a student can't read, he doesn't belong in college"-type philosophy. For another, content area instructors, on the whole, have never been exposed to a course on reading theory or skills, thus they don't often know what reading instructors mean when they talk about content area people teaching reading and study skills. For still another, many reading instructors are not prepared properly to gain the interest or the involvement of other instructors. They often alienate subject matter teachers in this zeal. But the biggest problem in reaching content area instructors to obtain their cooperation in a truly developmental reading program at a given school is that we reading instructors have defeated our own attempts at such a goal because we have turned reading - which is a skill - into a course. And if not one course - several. And in many cases - reading labs and reading centers.

How many times have you heard this: "Gee, this kid can't read his history book. He needs to be taking a reading class." The premise here is that a reading course will help that student read his history text successfully; another usually false premise. Reading classes typically mold themselves to some course outline written by the instructors teaching them. The typical reading course is not designed to help a student read his history, but designed as a regular course, in a regular meeting place, at the same time on certain days of the week, with assignments that cover everything from vocabulary development

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drills to timed reading and comprehension tests. How does this help the student who wants to read history better? He might even raise his general reading level during the course so that statistically the reading instructor can prove he is doing a good job of teaching reading. No doubt he is; but not in the content areas or the student's specific area of need. Yet, the content area instructor thinks that once a student who can't read his history book has completed a reading course, he should be able to read his history text better. Most research studies do not support this premise.

Let's go back to the first premise: the content area instructor should teach reading and study skills, too. Is it true?

- he knows the vocabulary of his subject better than anyone else.
- he knows the text he is using better than anyone else, both from the content standpoint and the difference in facts and inferences and biases an author has in the subject.
- he is familiar with the many resources outside the text, both for the super student who wants more and for the slower student who needs a different text or a broader background.
- he is the most knowledgeable one to set purposes in reading the text, particularly study purposes.
- he can understand complex concepts and relationships upon which many textbooks are set; in other words, he has a backlog of reading and experiences to bring to the interpretation of the book content.
- he should be able to motivate students' interest in reading since it is his selected subject he is teaching.
- he makes up the tests the student must take; therefore, he is most capable of preparing a student for studying the book in a particular manner.

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- he uses a textbook or books as the basis for his course; that makes him a teacher of reading whether he likes it or not.

When I first started teaching reading sixteen years ago, there was a theme from somewhere that was rather prevalent and catchy: Every teacher a teacher of reading. In sixteen years, I'm not certain we've come any closer. Most reading classes are still courses or Lab situations which we try to parallel on importance or status with language labs or science labs. Most states still do not require that secondary teachers or college teachers take a methods course in reading. When a new teacher arrives on campus and sees that there are reading courses and lab, he naturally assumes, since he wasn't educated any better, that his job is to teach a subject and our jobs are to teach those "poor dumb kids" who don't know how to read.

On top of all that, the courses we do teach in reading are quite often not accepted by four year schools for transfer credit, and some two-year schools do not even offer reading courses for graduation credit. We are often placed geographically in weird quarters to teach our "remedial" classes, such as a nurse's examination room or some corner of the P.E. Building. And many of us were picked from the ranks to teach reading and have learned more from experience than from our own educational preparation.

So how do we change our image and do something about turning our reading courses into an expected panacea for subject matter instructors?

1. We can't be expert in every subject, but we do or should posses the knowledge necessary to help subject matter teachers.
2. We can make sure that our reading courses are based on the needs of the students at our own schools.

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3. We can put pressure on four year colleges and universities with teacher training programs and put pressure on publishers to design books using what we know about study skills techniques.

I'd like to examine each one of these points more closely.

The first is spreading the knowledge we do possess about reading skills in the subject matter areas:

1. Use available research

   a. Betts' and Marksheffel's[1] studies indicate that standardized reading tests place students anywhere from one year to four years above his instructional level. Studies such as this can be used to break the ice with subject matter instructors.

   b. Find research information for particular subject areas, such as Walter Hill's "Content Textbooks, Help or Hindrance?"[2], A New Look at Reading in the Social Studies[3], or Fusing Reading Skills and Content[4]. These works will show that:

      (1) reading instruction in the content areas is neglected

      (2) readability formulas are neglected by subject matter teachers

      (3) vocabulary load is excessive

      (4) some comprehension concepts are poorly taught (chronology, cause-effect)

      (5) study skills are neglected

      (6) disabled readers are neglected.

2. Provide services for the subject matter teacher

   a. Offer to come to class and test his students. Select an representative sample from the text being used. Develop about ten questions of three types: facts, inference and vocabulary.

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Duplicate the questions with enough space for fill-in answers; no objective questions. 70% correct is capable; 55-65 should be tested further; 50 or less, direct to you.

b. Offer to come to class and explain study skills techniques.

c. Offer to tabulate readability tests on textbooks being used or considered.

d. Offer to give a standardized test for speed and comprehension and vocabulary for his class.

e. From test results, work up modules in vocabulary and comprehension of subject matter

f. Offer to come to division meetings and explain what your program does and doesn't do. Bring handouts on study skills techniques and materials available for his use.

g. Offer to hold in-service training workshops: (for a division)

(1) study skills techniques

(2) discuss student problems in reading

(3) how to effectively use the textbook in class (skimming, surveying)

(4) preparing students for tests

h. Offer to hold school-wide workshops or create an Academic Senate Committee on Reading-Study Skills, using your course or lab as the backbone. We need to instill in the subject matter teacher that time spent discussing study techniques, overviewing the book, how to use chronologies, glossaries, how to survey, etc., is all part of that teacher's job since he knows the book and the material best.

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i. Invite local high school teachers to come to the workshops.

j. Offer to train tutors in study skills and a particular subject.

k. Get the bookstore to stock helpful books in reading and study skills.

l. Re-do our own courses to fit student needs in subject area (modules/mini-courses)

3. Put pressure on the four year schools and the high schools.

a. Develop credit or at least pay advancement credit for reading skills workshops, through your local four year schools. Get administrative help.

b. Use your courses as a teacher prep lab.

c. Summer workshops.

When you boil it all down, the job of teaching reading has one common denominator comprised of three parts. As Olive Niles states:"the task of showing how students can get into the printed page, how to get what they want from it, and how to get out of it when any more time spent on it would be wasted. No reading specialist can do this well in all content areas. That's why the teaching of reading belongs in the content area classrooms."[5]

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